

Interview mit Professor John R. Searle

*John R. Searle, geboren 1932 in Denver, ist einer der bekanntesten und einflussreichsten Philosophen der Gegenwart. Seine Ausbildung in Philosophie, Politik und Wirtschaftswissenschaften hatte er hauptsächlich in Oxford erhalten. Seit 1959 lehrt er an der Universität von Kalifornien in Berkeley. Searle ist kein Philosophen-Philosoph: Seine Themen wie vor allem die Art, wie er seine Themen anpackt, sprechen zum einen nicht nur Philosophen an: Sein Einfluß auf die gesamten Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaften ist allenfalls mit dem von Wittgenstein vergleichbar – mit dessen Kritik das Searlesche Philosophieren denn auch begann. Zum anderen bezieht Searle nicht nur zu philosophischen Fragen Stellung. Mit dezidierten Äußerungen zur Redefreiheit an den Universitäten und zu den Versuchen einer multikulturellen Neubestimmung des Lehrplans an amerikanischen Schulen zeigt sich Searle auch in öffentlichen Debatten als streitbarer Denker. In der Philosophie wie im öffentlichen Diskurs nimmt Searle nie ein Blatt vor den Mund. Er kommt immer sofort zur Sache. Argumente sind für ihn stets wichtiger als Autoritäten. Searle schreibt oft so, als würde eine philosophische Debatte erst mit ihm anfangen. Das wirkt oft provozierend. Aber Searles Provokationen haben in der Tat schon mehrfach ganz neue philosophische Entwicklungen eingeleitet. Zu seinen wichtigsten Veröffentlichungen zählen *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969), *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (1983) und *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), die allesamt in deutscher Übersetzung bei Suhrkamp erschienen sind. Diese Themen und vor allem deren Schnittstellen entsprechen den drei Schwerpunkten der Philosophie von Searle: Sprachphilosophie, Philosophie des Geistes und Sozialphilosophie. Schon in den *Speech Acts* waren auch die beiden anderen Themenbereiche berührt. Worin liegt der Unterschied, ob ein Papagei einen Satz nachplappert oder ein kompetenter Sprecher uns mit seiner Äußerung etwas zu verstehen geben will? Und wovon hängt es ab, welche Rolle Äußerungen in den verschiedenen lebensweltlichen Kontexten haben? Die erste Frage beantwortet Searle durch Rekurs auf spezielle Sprecherabsichten; die zweite durch Rekurs auf diverse Regeln und Institutionen. In den späteren Arbeiten werden diese Antworten durch Einbettung in die entsprechenden Basistheorien weiter begründet. *Intentionality* liefert eine allgemeine Intentionalitätstheorie; *The Construction of Social Reality* die entsprechend umfassendere Institutionentheorie.*

Stark ist Searle nicht nur als Konstrukteur neuer Theorien; berühmt ist er auch für seine brillanten Attacken. Diese richten sich meist gegen den jeweiligen philosophischen Mainstream. Seine Sprechakt-Taxonomie zum Beispiel gegen Wittgensteins Diktum von der unendlichen Vielfalt unserer Sprachspiele; seine These vom Primat der Semantik gegenüber der Syntax sowohl gegen die Sprachauffassung Chomskys als auch gegen derzeit modische Vergleiche des menschlichen Geistes mit einem Computer; und sein robuster Realismus gegen jene pseudo-wittgensteinsche Manie, die alle Tatsachen als sprachlich konstituierte ausgibt. Das folgende Interview entstand im Rahmen eines Autorenkolloquiums mit John Searle, das unter der Leitung der Professoren Georg Meggle (Philosophie, Leipzig) und Günter Grewendorf (Linguistik, Frankfurt am Main) im Juni 1999 im ZiF stattfand. Die Fragen stellte PD Dr. Ralf Stoecker von der Fakultät für Geschichtswissenschaft und Philosophie an der Universität Bielefeld.

Ralf Stoecker: *Professor Searle, you are one of the most distinguished philosophers in the United States today. The book that first laid the foundation for your outstanding philosophical reputation was "Speech Acts" (1969, dtsch.: »Sprechakte«), which grew out of your dissertation 10 years earlier. It was obviously written under the influence of your teachers John Austin and Peter Strawson. Could you say a little bit more about your philosophical origin and broad philosophical background?*

John Searle: I have always been interested in philosophical problems, even as a small child. I first began to study philosophy systematically when I was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin. However, I did not take very many philosophy courses. But when I went to Oxford in the early 1950s I began seriously studying philosophy. Oxford at that time was in a golden age of philosophical activity. There were a large number of first-rate philosophers teaching there. I think the people who most influenced me were Peter Strawson, John L. Austin, Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, Paul Grice and David Pears. There were a number of others whose lectures, classes and seminars I attended, including Michael Dummett, Stuart Hampshire, Elisabeth Anscombe, Herbert Hart, Gilbert Ryle and Friedrich Waismann. If one counts visiting professors such as Quine, I would have to say that I think the collection of active philosophers in Oxford in the years I was there both as a student and as a faculty member, from 1952-1959, was the best the world has had in one place at one time since ancient Athens. The people that I learned most from were Strawson and Austin.

The philosophical style that dominated Oxford at the time was called "ordinary language philosophy". I never took very seriously either the exaggerated claims that were sometimes made about the value of the methods of analyzing expressions in ordinary language, nor did I take seriously the unreasonable attacks on these methods in philosophy. However, it does seem to me that we benefited enormously from the obsession with rigor and clarity that characterized Oxford at the time. I have found that though there are limitations on how much you can do with ordinary language analysis in solving traditional philosophical problems, the methods of logical analysis that I learned as a student in Oxford, I believe, are universal in application, and I have tried to apply them to problems of the philosophy of mind, and in social philosophy as well.

Ralf Stoecker: *"Speech Acts" and its elaboration in "Expression and Meaning" (1979) formulate your theory of language. But philosophy of language is in your view just a branch of the philosophy of mind. Hence, your book "Intentionality" (1983, dtsh.: »Intentionalität«) provided a considerable extension and generalization of your theory. But why and in how far is language dependent on intentionality?*

John Searle: I take the philosophy of language to be a branch of the philosophy of mind in this sense: The function of mental states in our evolutionary history is to enable us to represent and cope with the world outside ourselves. The mind enables us both to get information about the world, and to coordinate intentional action in the world. Language is an immensely powerful extension of these very capacities. So, an animal without language can have perceptions and even some sorts of memories and beliefs and desires, but once an animal has language it has an immensely richer system of representation. However, the representational capacity of languages is an extension of the biological representational capacity of the mind. So when the child learns its first language it has to have a child-like form of intentionality to start with, and then it is able to extend the intentionality of the mind enormously by acquiring linguistic capacities. That enables us to have richer intentionality, which enables us to have richer linguistic capacities, and so on up in a kind of boot-strapping effect. So, I see a complex series of inner relations between mental capacities and linguistic capacities. But the fundamental notion needs to be kept in mind, namely, the intentionality of the mind is basic and the intentionality of language is derived from that.

Ralf Stoecker: *Intentionality and consciousness are sometimes taken to be the two core topics, the crunch points, in the philosophy of mind. Yet, you don't agree that these really are two separate issues, do you?*

John Searle: I think that there is an essential connection between consciousness and intentionality in the following respect: Though many, perhaps most of our intentional states are unconscious for most of the time, nonetheless we understand an intentional state, such as an unconscious belief, as explicitly a mental state only to the extent that we understand it as something that is potentially conscious. So, for example, even when I am sound asleep, I can believe that Bill Clinton is president of the United States. But if you ask what fact about me makes it the case when I am sound asleep, that I have this unconscious belief, the only fact in question is that I have a brain structure which is capable of producing that belief in a conscious form and is capable of producing behavior that is appropriate to the conscious form of that belief. So we should think of unconscious mental states as states which, though unconscious then and there, are at least potentially conscious. Talk of unconscious intentionality is talk of those states of the brain capable of producing intentionality in a conscious form. That, for me, is the connection between consciousness and intentionality. There is a logical or conceptual connection between consciousness and intentionality even though not all intentional states are conscious and not all conscious states are intentional.

Ralf Stoecker: *The book "Intentionality" and its forerunners like the article "Minds, brains, and programs" set you apart from almost everyone else in current philosophy of mind. One of the most spectacular consequences of your theory is that two flourishing scientific disciplines, namely Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science, are grounded on serious philosophical errors. That sounds like another of many philosophical attempts to rule into science, which were usually doomed to fail. Do you really think that these research programs should simply be given up like astrology? And, more general, what else is in your mind the proper subject of scientific psychology?*

John Searle: Actually, I think you misunderstand my position a little bit in the way you pose the question. I do not claim that all forms of artificial intelligence and cognitive science are based on philosophical errors. Rather I criticize only what I call strong artificial intelligence, or strong AI, and the corresponding branch of cognitive science, the branch of cognitive science that accepts strong AI. Strong AI is the view that the appropriately programmed digital computer thereby necessarily has a mind in exactly the same sense that you and I have minds. This, I think, involves a logical mistake and it's a rather simple mistake, namely the mistake of confusing the syntactical processes of the implemented computer program with the semantic or contentful mental processes of actual human minds. I do not think that, as a consequence of this mistake, the research program should be given up like astrology. No, I think that there is a valid research program in artificial intelligence and a much larger research program in cognitive science. I think, however, that artificial intelligence and cognitive science can go on as flourishing research disciplines once this error is removed. It's true that cognitive science was founded on a computational model of the mind and that was a mistake. But lots of disciplines had been founded on mistakes and gone on to flourish even after the mistake was removed. One thinks of chemistry which was founded on a belief in alchemy and yet chemistry flourished after the alchemical illusions were removed. So, similarly, I would like to see cognitive science flourish after the mistake of strong AI is removed. The proper program of cognitive science is, I think, the study of the mind and how it is embodied in the human brain. I see cognitive neural science as the most promising area for advances in cognitive science.

Furthermore, I do not see my criticisms of strong AI as a philosophical critique of some genuine branch of science. Quite the reverse. I am struck by how anti-scientific the project of strong AI really is. A serious science of the mind has to take the brain seriously because the mind is a set of biological processes, and the brain is a biological organ like any other. A truly scientific approach to problems of cognitive science begins by seeing the fundamental biological character of human mentality. Strong AI denies all of that. It is a philosophical theory to the effect that all that is essential for having a mind is implementing the right computer program. Any hardware whatever will do, provided only that it is stable enough and rich enough to carry the program. That seems to me profoundly unscientific, indeed anti-scientific, and I am invoking the history of science against this sort of philosophical error. It is important to emphasize that it is not a consequence of my view that only brains can be conscious and have intentionality. That would be like saying only the heart can pump blood. We don't know how brains do it, and until we know how brains do it, it is unlikely that we will be able to construct artificial machines capable of consciousness and intentionality. But one thing we know for sure is that the scientific account of the brain is not to be neglected. We will not duplicate the specific causal powers of the brain just by simulating their formal structure as a set of 0s and 1s in a computer program.

Ralf Stoecker: *You repeatedly pointed out that what sets you apart from most contemporary philosophers is a different philosophical perspective, the ontological point of view instead of the epistemic one. Could you please explain this distinction?*

John Searle: After Descartes, western philosophy was primarily dominated by an epistemic point of view. The central questions in philosophy depended on such issues as how is knowledge possible. Indeed, Locke defined his enterprise in the Essay as one of examining the nature and extent of human knowledge. The central aim of this project was to overcome skepticism, and epistemology is the study of knowledge, and a center of epistemology for a long time, was the problem of trying to give a solid foundation for knowledge that would remove skeptical doubts. I think this obsession with skepticism and the skeptical paradoxes is a mistake. I think that much more important than the question of how you know about the world is the question, what is it that you know about, when you do know about the world. In short, the question of ontology, what things exist and what sort of mode of existence do they have, is a much more fundamental philosophical question than the question of epistemology, how do we know about these things, which exist, and what are the mechanisms by which we acquire this knowledge and what are the foundations on which the knowledge is based. I am not rejecting epistemology, I think it is a legitimate topic of philosophical investigation. I just do not believe that it is the center of philosophy. I see ontology as a more fundamental research program in philosophy than is epistemology.

Ralf Stoecker: *From an ontological point of view physical and mental facts do not exhaust the realm of what there is in the world. There are also institutions like states, restaurants or marriages, and the features which depend on the existence of these institutions like being Bundeskanzler, waiter or a widow. Traditionally these cultural phenomena are opposed to natural ones. But, according to your book "The Construction of Social Reality" (1995, dtsh.: »Die Konstruktion der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit«), this received distinction is (like the one between mind and body) seriously misguided. Why?*

John Searle: Traditionally we accept that the entities in the world divide into two kinds, two branches, two forms of reality: the mental and the physical. I reject that distinction, I think we just live in one world and that that one world has both what we think of as mental features and physical features. But the traditional vocabulary and the metaphysics that went with it seems to me to be obsolete. Now some philosophers have even said that we really live in three worlds: a physical world, a mental world, and a cultural or social world. And I want to reject that view as well. I think we live in one world and in that world there are both, so-called mental and so-called physical phenomena, but there are also cultural and social phenomena. So I reject the metaphysical distinction between nature and culture just as I reject the metaphysical distinction between mind and body. I think a much more fundamental distinction is the distinction between those features of the world that exist independently of us, features such as force, mass, and gravitational attraction, and those features of the world that exist only relative to our usages and observations and intentionality generally. And I make this distinction as the distinction between the observer-relative features of the world such as money, property, marriage, and government and the observer-independent features of the world such as force, mass, and gravitational attraction. In general, one could say that the natural sciences study observer-independent phenomena and the social sciences study observer-relative phenomena. As usual, psychology falls in the middle. Some of the phenomena that it studies are observer-independent, some are observer-relative. That is the distinction I would like to use to replace the old traditional distinctions between mind and body and nature and culture. Now it turns out, given this conception, that most of what we think of as paradigmatic social phenomena, such as money and governments and football games and property and marriages, not to mention language, are observer-relative. It's only human activities that create these phenomena and in my book "The Construction of

Social Reality" I tried to describe the logical structure of that construction and the logical structure of the continued existence of social and institutional phenomena.

Ralf Stoecker: *During the last 40 years you have elaborated a philosophical theory, which is, in an impressive way, original, comprehensive and coherent. Most recently you put together the pieces of your theory into one single book, "Mind, Language, and Society" (1998), so that it is now comfortably easy to get an authentic picture of your philosophical work. But, as we learned in your public lecture at ZiF, it is still work in progress. Your next topic is rationality and action. Could you give us a hint what you are after and where it fits into your overall project?*

John Searle: In a way the book on rationality is the hardest book I ever tried to write and I am not really sure if I can succeed in the project or exactly how it's going to turn out. The investigation proceeds on the assumption that our traditional conception of rationality that goes back to Aristotle's claim that deliberation is always about means and never about ends, the conception that receives its strongest formulation in Hume's claim that "reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions", is mistaken. I think that we ought to think of the process of reasoning as a process that is constrained by the semantic and intentional structure of the phenomena that we are using in our reasoning processes and I would like to give a description of that in a way that overcomes certain traditional errors. I see my way over some of the issues and in particular I see the importance of human freedom in the discussion of the problem of rationality. But how to solve the specific problems is something that I have not yet figured out. So, in a year or so, I hope to be able to answer this question better.

Ralf Stoecker: *An impression one gets in reading your books and attending your lectures is, that you have a special liking for the destruction of well-established philosophical problems (like the mind-body problem or the problem of free will). Yesterday, in the discussion you once recommended that, as philosophers, we should be more childlike. So, are you one of the children in the fairy tale that strip the emperor of his non-existing clothes?*

John Searle: In some ways I like the analogy with the child that is saying that the emperor has no clothes. That was my situation when I took on strong artificial intelligence. It was a dominant view and it seemed to me there was nothing there. I had a similar experience when I debated certain so-called deconstructionist philosophers such as Derrida. It seems to me there is nothing there, it's largely show with no underlining substance. But that is exposure of mistake and is incidental to my main philosophical enterprise. The joy of philosophy comes from trying to get knowledge and understanding of difficult areas, and if you get them then that's part of the pleasure that you are being able to explain your results to the philosophical public and to the general public. The satisfaction of philosophy comes from trying to discover and state the truth, and incidentally you have the satisfaction of removing falsehoods. The aim is not primarily destructive. My overall aim as a philosopher is constructive rather than destructive.